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Irish Earth

Author(s): Alexander H. Krappe

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COLLECTANEA

IRISH EARTH

ST. PATRICK, as is well known, is credited with freeing Ireland from all sorts of venomous reptiles.¹ If he did, his task was certainly performed thoroughly, for no snakes, whether venomous or harmless, are found in the island to this day. Mediaeval writers, whether or no they accepted the tradition, were well aware of the fact. Bede (*Hist. gent. Anglor.* i, 1) points out that there are no serpents in Ireland and if any are introduced from Britain they quickly die on breathing Irish air. In the twelfth century Giraldus Cambrensis (*Topogr. Hib.* i, 23) testified to the absence of snakes, adders, toads, and frogs from Irish soil. An Irish monk, known under the name of Marcus, who had settled in the Irish monasteries of Ratisbon toward the middle of the twelfth century, described his native country as free from serpents, frogs, toads, and venomous animals in general.² An Irish MS. quoted by Whitley Stokes³ compares Ireland with Paradise for the same reason.

The Apostle of Ireland is credited with rendering much the same service to the Isle of Guernsey.⁴ Nor is he the only saint to whom such a feat was attributed. St. Hilary of Poitiers, on landing in the isle of Gallinaria (on the Italian Riviera), found it overrun with serpents. He did not drive them out altogether but assigned to them a piece of land from which they were not to budge. Nor have they ever done so since. St. Honoratus, on arriving in the island which still bears his name (on the French Riviera), found it infested with venomous reptiles. His prayer caused the sea to flood the island and to drown the serpents. Ever since it has been free from snakes and lizards.

¹ *Legenda aurea*, c. 50.

² R. Verdeyen, *Nuovi Studi Medievali*, i, 229.

³ *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, London, 1887, t. i, p. xxx, n. 1.

⁴ *Revue des traditions populaires*, iii (1888), p. 531 (483).

Much the same feat was accomplished by St. Arnaud in the isle of Yeu (off the coast of Vendée), while St. Maudès obtained as a special favour that the earth in which his bones should rest should be free from all venomous reptiles. That is why in the isle called after him (off the north coast of Brittany) no snakes are found to the present day and why a little of its dust, sprinkled on a snake, will kill it forthwith. St. Budoc drove all noxious animals from the Ile Verte near Bréhat (in the same region).⁵ We are thus dealing with a tradition widespread in Western Europe and extending in France from the Alpes Maritimes to the coasts of Brittany.

In Ireland the absence of serpents was noted centuries before the arrival of St. Patrick. It is recorded by the compiler Solinus (xxii, 3) who drew of course on older documents :

"Hibernia approaches to Britain . . . it is so luxuriant in its grass that unless its cattle are now and again removed from their pasturage, satiety may cause danger to them. There is there no snake (*illic nullus anguis*), and few birds. . . ."

In Ireland itself the same fact appears to have been noted in heathen times ; for, according to a curious tradition, the Fir Bolg, one of the legendary or prehistoric races of Ireland, were fabled to have filled leather bags with Irish earth and to have shipped them to the countries of the East, where it was in great demand, being scattered around cities to kill snakes.⁶ This story is clearly meant to explain the name of the Fir Bolg, the second element of which was, rightly or wrongly, connected with a Celtic word meaning " bag " and which recurs in the Italian *bolgia* known to all readers of Dante. Inasmuch as the Irish chronologies place the doings of the Fir Bolg many centuries prior to the coming of St. Patrick, it is clear that the reputation of Irish earth as deadly to serpents was believed to antedate the Christianization of Ireland.

Zoogeography was in its infancy throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. None the less a certain amount of attention was paid by geographical writers and compilers to the presence or absence of certain animal species in certain regions. Thus

⁵ Paul Sébillot, *Le Folk-Lore de France*, Paris, 1904-1907, ii, 81.

⁶ Henri Hubert, *The Rise of the Celts*, London, 1934, p. 227.

Solinus (xxii, 8) notes the absence of snakes from the isle of Thanet. Edrisi (c. 190) asserts that at Saragossa, in Spain, no serpents are seen, and that, if such a reptile is brought in from the outside, it dies forthwith. Similarly, a certain island in the diocese of Arles, in Southern France, was believed to be immune from snakes.⁷ The Jesuit father, Georges Fournier (1595-1652), a well-known geographer and author of a number of text-books, assures his readers that in the Orkney Islands no serpents and no fools are found.⁸ Whatever one may think of the latter statement, the absence of snakes from the islands west and north of Britain is a fact. Occasionally such writers went too far in their generalizations. Thus the assertion of Eumenius, author of a Panegyric in honour of Constantine (c. 9) that there are no noxious reptiles in Britain, is clearly erroneous, since *Vipera berus*, the only poisonous snake of Northern Europe, is found in Great Britain to the present day.

It was natural enough to account for the absence of such pests by the theory of an intervention by some saint or demigod, and it is noteworthy that St. Patrick and his fellow-saints of Gaul had at least one predecessor in classical antiquity in a tradition connected with the island of Crete :

"Starting out on his tenth labour, the lifting of the cattle of Geryones, Heracles gathered his forces in Crete, whose inhabitants accorded him the highest honours. Wishing to show them his appreciation, he cleansed the island of the wild beasts which infested it. And this is the reason why in later times not a single wild animal such as a bear, a wolf, a serpent, or any similar beast, was to be found there."⁹

We have quoted above an Irish tradition according to which

⁷ Gervasius of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia*, ed. Leibniz, t. i, p. 983.

⁸ Cf. W. E. Peuckert, *Mitteilungen d. Schlesischen Gesellschaft f. Volkskunde*, xxii (1920), p. 43.

⁹ *Diodorus Siculus*, iv, 17, 3. This text, slightly modified, turns up in the German chap-book known as the *Historia von Dr. Johann Fausten*, Frankfurt, 1587 (ed. Halle, Niemeyer, 1878, p. 68). In modern Crete the feat of having freed the island from noxious beasts is attributed to St. Paul; cf. Bernard Randolph, *The Present State of the Islands in the Archipelago*, Oxford, 1687, p. 93.

Irish earth is credited, not only with keeping snakes out of Ireland, but with destroying these reptiles wherever used. This tradition continued alive throughout the Middle Ages and far into modern times. Geoffroy of Monmouth (*Hist. reg. Brit.* viii, 11) speaks of the general curative properties of Irish stones and herbs, a belief still very much alive in Northern England toward the end of the last century. Thus in Northumbria Irish stones were held in high repute as a charm to keep frogs, snakes, and other vermin from entering the possessor's house.¹⁰ The monk Marcus of Ratisbon mentioned above states that Irish wood, horn and dust, introduced into any other country will drive out venom. The Old Norwegian *Speculum regale* (*Konungsskuggsjá*, p. 88, ed. Einersen) claims that by strewing sand or earth from Ireland in a circle around a venomous animal one is certain to bring about the latter's death. At Chatton, in Northumberland, it was believed, as late as the last century, that if a native of Ireland drew a ring round a toad or adder the creature could not get out and would die.¹¹ Bede credited Irish water with powers to cure snake-bite. A curious testimony is found in the French romance of *Ider*. The hero, after partaking of water from a poisoned spring, sinks into a lethargy, and in this condition is found by two princes, sons of a king of Ireland. Fortunately, they carry with them some Irish herbs, from which they forthwith prepare an infusion. No sooner has Ider swallowed it than it acts as an emetic, and he regains consciousness.¹² In the eighteenth century a gentleman, bitten by some reptile and suffering from a great swelling in consequence, seriously assured Sir Walter Scott, as the latter attests in the Introduction to his *Minstrelsy*, that he ascribed his cure to putting the affected finger into the mouth of an Irish mare. As late as the last century it was believed in Northumberland that when a dog is bitten by an adder the only remedy is to wash the place with the milk of an Irish cow.¹³

¹⁰ William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders*, London, 1879, p. 166.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Gaston Paris, *Histoire littéraire*, xxx, 206.

¹³ Henderson, *op. et loc. cit.*

Here again it is worth noting that the superstition in question antedates the Middle Ages. Let us listen once more to Solinus (xxii, 4) :

“ No bee has been brought thither (i.e. to Ireland), and if any one scatters dust or pebbles brought from thence among the hives in other countries the swarms desert their combs.”

Elsewhere (xxii, 8) he ascribes snake-destroying properties to earth from the isle of Thanet. M. Martin, toward the end of the seventeenth century, was told by the islanders of Burray, one of the Hebrides, that there were no mice there, and that if any were brought to the island they would promptly die, while earth from Burray, if taken to any part where there were mice, would quickly drive them away.¹⁴

Now it is noteworthy that much the same belief is attested for sundry Mediterranean countries by writers of antiquity. Pliny the Elder (*N.H.* iii, 11) credits the earth of Ebusus (now Yviza, the south-westernmost of the Balearic Isles) with the power of driving away serpents, and Pomponius Mela (ii, 7, p. 475 f.) records the same tradition. Elsewhere (v, 7) Pliny mentions an island named Galata, off the coast of Tunisia, the soil of which kills the scorpion whose sting is dreaded in Southern Europe and North Africa. Speaking of Sicilian achate, Pliny (xxxvii, 54) states :

“ This last (i.e. the “ sacred ” achate) it is thought, is good for wounds inflicted by spiders and scorpions, a property which I could really believe to belong to stones of Sicily, for, the moment they breathe the air of that province, scorpions lose their venom.”

The compiler Ælian (*De nat. anim.* v, 2) asserts that the earth of the island of Crete is fatal to venomous serpents, so much so that snake-charmers, importing African snakes into the island, are obliged to take Libyan earth along to prevent the animals from dying. Earths with curative properties were widely known in Greece, the most generally esteemed being Lemnian earth, which was credited with miraculous powers against poisons,

¹⁴ M. Martin, “ A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland,” John Pinkerton’s *Voyages and Travels*, iii (Philadelphia, 1811), p. 696.

especially the bites of venomous reptiles. A version of the Philoctetes myth recorded by Philostratus (*Heroica*, vi, 2) attributes the cure of the hero's wound, caused ultimately by the poison of the Lernean hydra, to this Lemnian earth. According to Dioscorides (v, 113) this earth had a singular virtue against poisons and acted as an emetic when poison had already been swallowed. It was also sovereign against the bites of venomous reptiles. Galen (*De Simpl. Medic. Fac.* ix, 206) states that Lemnian earth was used locally for ulcers and wounds, as an emetic, and for poisonous bites.¹⁵ In Christian times much the same reputation was attached to Maltese earth found in small quantities in the cave of St. Paul near Città Vecchia. It was used for smallpox and fevers, and particularly for the bites of reptiles. This magical use was associated directly with the incident of St. Paul and the viper (*Acts*, xxviii, 3-6), after which all reptiles in Malta are said to have become harmless.¹⁶ Finally, if we are to believe Gregory of Tours (*De gloria martyr*, i, 7), earth from the Holy Sepulchre was peddled about in Gaul in his time, being credited with various curative powers and also with driving away serpents.

Nor must it be assumed that Ireland was the only part of Western Europe to which this ancient tradition had as it were been transferred. We have mentioned above the isle of St. Maudès (in Brittany) in which the saint was fabled to have performed the same feat which St. Patrick is credited with having accomplished for Ireland. A little sand from that isle, thrown on viper, salamander, or toad, was supposed to kill it. The mendicant friars of a convent which formerly stood on the Ile Verte near Bréhat used to distribute earth from the isle as a cure for snake bites.

There is no sound reason to derive these Breton traditions from the Irish legend, the less so because they do not even appear to be restricted to islands. According to a tradition

¹⁵ F. W. Hasluck, "Terra Lemnia," *Annual of the British School of Athens*, xvi (1909-10), pp. 220-31; *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, Oxford, 1929, ii, 671 ff.; cf. also C. Fredrich, *Mitteilungen d. dtisch. Archaeol. Instituts, Athen. Abt.* xxxi (1906), p. 72 ff.

¹⁶ O. Dähnhardt, *Natursagen*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1907-13, ii, 193 ff.

recorded in a charter of 1467 a part of the Forest of Paimpont, known as the "Breil au Seigneur," is stated to be free from all noxious beasts and even from flies, so much so that if any venomous animal or fly is carried into this part of the forest it dies instantly.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Irish tradition of St. Patrick is quite probably the parent of a South German tradition according to which St. Pirmin, the founder of the Benedictine abbey of Reichenau, freed that isle, in the Lake of Constance, from all reptiles.¹⁸ For at Reichenau Irish influences were very strong in the centuries immediately following its foundation (724): St. Patrick's Day was celebrated there probably from its inception,¹⁹ and also the festival of St. Brigid (February 1st) is known to have been observed there as early as the eighth century.

To conclude: the tradition concerning the efficacy of Irish earth against venomous serpents and snake poison is of Mediterranean origin, being attached, in classical antiquity, to the soils of a number of Mediterranean islands (Ebusus, Galata, Sicily, Malta, and, chiefly, Lemnos), some of which were known, or supposed, to be free from venomous serpents. The absence of these noxious animals from Ireland, a fact well known in antiquity, in due course led to a belief in an analogous action of Irish earth against serpents and snake-bite. Thus Irish earth came to play, in the popular medicine of Northern Europe, much the same rôle which Lemnian earth (among others) had played in the Mediterranean countries. The resulting trade was probably lucrative enough to justify, in the eyes of the vendors, the adoption of advertising methods which look almost modern. Certainly, on being told that the Fir Bolg sent Irish earth to the East to protect eastern cities from venomous serpents, one

¹⁷ Sébillot, *op. cit.* i, 292. The belief that snakes, if introduced into an island in which they are not naturally found, will die forthwith was noted in Melanesia. At Mota, in the Banks' Islands, there are no land snakes, and the natives maintain that if imported they will not live; cf. R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians*, Oxford, 1891, p. 18.

¹⁸ Anton Birlinger, *Aus Schwaben*, Wiesbaden, 1874, i, 40 f.

¹⁹ Dom Louis Gougau, *Gaelic Pioneers of Christianity*, Dublin, 1923, p. 101.

cannot help suspecting that this tradition was set afloat for a definite purpose, viz. to show the superiority of the native product over its most serious competitor, Lemnian earth, which was peddled in the Balkans and the Near East on the strength of analogous properties with which it was credited.

Princeton, N.J.

ALEXANDER H. KRAPPE

NOTES ON STAFFORDSHIRE FOLKLORE

The Thurse. Students of fairylore know the hopthrust or hobthrush as a species of sprite which delights to work for human beings. There are countless stories about his beneficent (or malicious) activity. Thus the fairies of Lady Meadows in Ipstones parish would upset the cottages and farms until bribed by pieces of cake left as offerings.

How did this idea arise? We are quite familiar with the mysterious Poltergeist which raps and moves things about. This would seem to be the first element entering into the conception of a fairy. Old Nancy the fairy of Mixon in the Moorlands would rap on table and wainscotting quite in a manner of a poltergeist.

The second element entering into the composition of the conception fairy would be the race-memory of the pagan nature-gods, reduced now to the lower grade of beneficent or malicious sprites. The Fiddling Hobthurse of Thor's Cave in the Manifold Valley, whose "fiddling" or screeching filled the cavern, was however something more than a harmless sprite. One cannot go far wrong in taking him to be the god to whom sacrifice was offered on the altar in the cave. Thor's Cave, as a matter of fact, has nothing to do with Thor. Its old name is Thursehole, the cave of the thurse or fairy. (Thus also Thursfield, the field of the fairy.)

The word *thurse* would be from the same root as the Greek *theos*, a god. One can identify the "thurses" with the "duses" which, according to St. Augustine, the Gauls worshipped. For the gods of Staffordshire were Celtic, not Saxon, like the Staffordshire people themselves.